

ARTPULSE

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“IT’S A CONSTANT STRUGGLE TO KEEP THE ‘THINGNESS’ AT BAY”

An Interview with Deborah Dancy

Although her art is thoroughly abstract, Deborah Dancy’s paintings, drawings, and works in other mediums are intimately bound to the world of concrete objects and the ephemeral perceptions and feelings of everyday life. On her website (deborahdancy.com), she comments on her fascination with “the poetic terrain of the incomplete, the fragment, the ruin and residue of ‘almost was,’ and ‘might become’” that she’s encountered in the zone between abstraction and representation. In the following interview, Dancy talks about how this notion has influenced her artmaking; the wide and ever-expanding array of thoughts, impressions, and situations that have shaped her artistic practice over time; the interaction of different mediums in her creative process; and ways in which the commonplace and the near-at-hand have often had a profound influence on her most abstract work.

BY JEFF EDWARDS



Deborah Dancy, *Midnight Bloom*, 2015, oil on paper. All images are courtesy of the artist and N'Namdi Contemporary, Miami.

Jeff Edwards - Pd like to start with a quote from the artist statement on your website: "I am interested in investigating the region that exists between the abstraction and representation." What do you mean by that, and how does it play out in your paintings and other works?
Deborah Dancy - For me, the space between abstraction and representation feels like an intermediary region full of potential and trepidation. I try to reconcile how to make an abstract painting interface with this quality of "about to become"—that thingness where an image begins to take on too much specificity by defining itself; that's the space that excites and unnerves me—because it's a constant struggle to keep the "thingness" at bay. So when I make a painting there's always a little battle of controlling all these elements that attempt to dominate the space within the painting. It comes down to making those features ambiguous enough and the space unstable enough so that they exist just on the verge of becoming, but don't.

J.E. - Is your process mostly intuitive and spontaneous, or do you have some kind of plan in advance for things like color, composition, and imagery?

D.D. - I work pretty spontaneously and definitely intuitively. My process is almost always the same—my paintings start out what I call a beautiful mess—I put paint on and scrape it off, back and forth until I find that something that holds my interest, and then expand it until it begins to announce itself with some authority. Over the years my palette has become lighter—but even then, but I usually find myself gravitating toward the same colors and tonalities. Every now and then I force myself to grab some really off base color that I have no real affinity for to see if I can make it work in a painting, and my current palette really is a reflection of the wooded terrain around my home.

J.E. - What other elements or aspects of yourself are embodied in your paintings? Do your personal history or your ongoing relationships with the people, places, and things around you show up in the imagery that you paint?

D.D. - Yeah, relationships, space, place, and history—personal and social seem to end up in the work. They permit me to examine my feelings about relationships or surroundings or even respond to events that unexpectedly catapult into your life and knock the work in a completely new direction. It can be very exciting and a little unnerving at the same time because quite often it's immediate, entering your work right away and other times, it gets tucked away and you forget about it until one day there it is, and you wonder how it found its way into your consciousness. It has taken me years to learn to accept and embrace that concept and not question its legitimacy.

J.E. - I've noticed that over the years, specific forms appear in your paintings at certain points only to disappear later, such as the cartoony legs and feet that appear in your canvases from 2011 and 2012, or the linear forms that look like distressed geometric solids that were in many of your late 2012 and early 2013 paintings. Is there a language to these different kinds of shapes and images that you're exploring?

D.D. - That's an interesting thing about my process, the older I get the more I welcome unexpected life events into my work. The tangled, intertwined legs and feet in the 2011-12 paintings point to a new relationship. The physicality of paint echoed that and the paintings became an extension of what was happening in my life, whim-



Deborah Dancy. Courtesy of the artist.

sical, colorful, and erotic. Prior to that work I was concentrating on the interior world of self, which defined itself in my painting as awkwardly constructed structures in which perspective was askew.

J.E. - Your canvases from the beginning of this year (2015) are generally more muted in tone than a lot of earlier works, while your most recent paintings are much more colorful, but with a flat, medium-gray background that seems new to your work. How do you think your use of color has changed over time?

D.D. - Yes, this year my palette, both in paintings and drawings, shifted from winter, spring and into the summer. I think this may be the first time I painted in a kind of visceral response to the seasons and the shift in-between the seasons. It's about really being aware of when light starts to shift and changes color and intensity, and you feel the air more and smell the dirt and things awaken in you. The drawings done during the winter, because of being housebound—were about starkness and contrast and the geometry and architecture of bare trees. In spring, because as I was walking my dog a lot I began noticing the space between forms, the warming tones of bark, and emerging flora—back in the studio, it translated as nuanced tonalities. The most recent paintings you refer to are 36" x 36", a series



Deborah Dancy, *A House is Not a Home*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 72."



Deborah Dancy, *Look But Do Not Touch*, 2015, oil on canvas, 36" x 36."



Deborah Dancy, *Stump*, 2015, oil on canvas, 28" x 46."



"Deborah Dancy: Lush Life," installation view at N'Namdi Contemporary, Miami, October 10 thru November 14, 2015.



Deborah Dancy, *Opus Incertum*, 6, 2012, acrylic on paper, 22"x30."

ric "wirework" forms appeared in your paintings around 2012/2013, the same kinds of shapes were showing up in your smaller acrylic pieces too. What's the relationship between these two bodies of work? Are the works on paper something like sketches for the larger works, or is there more of a cross-influences going on?

D.D. - Usually I'm working in the two mediums simultaneously, drawing/works on paper and painting on canvas and there's almost always a shared language and conceptual framework running through both—though occasionally one medium will shoot ahead of the other. I find that when I'm stuck in big oil painting, I decide to draw or work in acrylic. Not that it's easier...it's just faster—it's somehow in my head feels more forgiving in many ways and it gives me time to think and tease out how to tackle the larger oil paintings. I don't think of the smaller acrylic works as 'traditional' sketches for the larger paintings—they're often the forerunner for things to come.

J.E. - *In 2012 when you were living in Florence, you did a series of works on paper titled "Dear Giotto." The most obvious relation between your series and Giotto's frescoes is the bright colors they share, but I suspect that there was more to your inspiration than just that. How did Giotto's work inspire you, and how is that reflected in your work?*

D.D. - The series "Dear Giotto" ended up being about the seduction of Giotto's frescoes and the abstractions I saw in them. Those elements of flattened out space between figure and architecture and the abutments of color created such sublime juxtapositions I couldn't get enough of them. I also envisioned the scaffolding that was built to hold the artist and his materials, and I imagined the complexity of those structures in space, the negative spaces between them, and flat shapes of his draped fabric in the frescoes; it all became all encompassing and inspirational for that work.

J.E. - *That same year you also did the series "Opus Incertum," which was inspired by the ruins around Palatine Hill in Rome. What was it about that spot that appealed to you as an abstract*

painter, and what effect did it have on your art?

D.D. - "Opus Incertum," an early Roman construction technique, involved placing irregular stones randomly in the construction of buildings. Seeing those ancient ruins in Rome allowed this sense of understanding of one history built on top of another for centuries and centuries inspired that work. So the works became a response to what felt like an accumulation of architectural histories, fragments of which lie on the ground scattered about. They became built drawings—about built histories, time and space.

J.E. - *You've also done semi-abstract photographic work based on landscapes, objects, and the human body, and a few video collaborations with composer Earl MacDonald and videographer Ted Efremoff. How do those other bodies of work relate to your painting and to one another, and what were your inspirations, intentions, and processes for each?*

D.D. - My photographic work and the collaborations have been so exciting and stimulating. It's like having the permission to play with and explore ideas with different media as a way to see another side to my paintings. I've discovered in my photographic work my other voice is one that allows me to examine a narrative about beauty and the sublime that isn't far from my painting but seems more accessible. The collaborative works with Earl MacDonald and Ted Efremoff have been so amazing... getting out of my private studio head and cross-pollinating with these amazing artists has forced my artistic vision to expand and develop while creating something so different.

J.E. - *Finally, is there anything emerging in your work right now that we don't know about yet? What are you up to in the studio right now, and do you have any hopes or plans for where you'd like to take your work next?*

D.D. - Right now I'm feeling a real need to see where the "Pernicious Beauty" series will take me... I'm excited about what seems like an open landscape of potential. ■